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ABSTRACT

A parenting curriculum need not be confined to the high school's home economics or social studies departments. When students are made aware that books are written for children who cannot yet read, there is no problem eliciting justifications for a unit on children's literature in the high school English class, a unit that compares the characteristics of children with the characteristics of appropriate literature. Lectures, filmstrips, movies, speakers, and discussions can be used to help the students follow children through the five developmental stages between birth and attending school. Discussion of each stage of development can be illustrated with a few examples of children's stories/books, demonstrating the techniques of reading stories to children. A residual effect of placing such a unit in the high school literature curriculum is that students lacking in language skills can experience success in the curriculum while getting needed practice in language arts. (A list of references and possible resources for the parenting/English unit is attached.) (RL)

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MOTHER GOOSE AND DOCTOR SEUSS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL: A Parenting Curriculum for High School English Classes

by Betty Bobo Seiden

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The role most students seem destined to play is one for which the schools have least prepared them. Most students will eventually become parents, but for some reason educators have ignored that role. Whether the traditional neglect is due to fear that preparation for parenthood may encourage an early assumption of that role or to the belief that no preparation is needed for such a natural phenomen, research has not yet enlightened us. However, our statistics on child abuse and neglect indicate that parental love and parenting skill do not come so easily. Too many parents just do not feel prepared to cope with the responsibilities of parenthood. Social workers in child abuse centers tell me that they receive calls about everything---discipline, feeding, toilet training. But at the same time we have never been better informed about the importance of the first few years of life or about the developmental sequences, thanks to people like Freud, Erickson, Piaget, Dr. Spock, et al.

Because all of my students, grades 9 through 12, are pregnant, I have had to face the reality of imminent parenthood. Practically all of my students return to regular school, leaving the parental role to be taken over by the grandmother, aunt or other surrogate. Even <u>pregnant</u> high school girls have difficulty seeing themselves as responsible for the care and feeding of another human being. But what better time than secondary school can there be for a parenting curriculum?

For many, high school will be the end of a formal educational experience. Even more fortuitous for the educator is the fact that high schoolers are egocentric enough and close enough to their own childhoods to re-live and examine their own development. Though they may not yet see themselves as parents, they readily put themselves in the child's place, recalling the need to be understood. This becomes especially obvious when they are asked after viewing the filmstrip "When Children Disobey" to write a response to the following questions: Describe a situation that happened to you when you were small that you thought was unfair. What was the most <u>effective</u> punishment you can remember?

A parenting curriculum need not be confined to the home economics or social studies departments. When first I attempted to teach a unit on children's literature, trying to infuse my students with my own excitement about the tremendous volume of delightful books for the pre-school child, I met at best only a

polite acceptance and sometimes a hostile, "I ain't gonna read no book to no child!" Undaunted, I tried again, and again, until I finally worked out a curriculum that students began to request. What had been missing initially was a component on child development. What are children like during their first 6 years of life and why should anyone read to them? So we begin the unit by defining our objectives. The first question for discussion becomes, What are the benefits of reading to a child?

When students are made aware that books are written for children who cannot yet read them there is no problem eliciting the following justifications for a unit on children's literature, i.e. picture books.

1. You and your child will share an experience that is mutually enjoyable and will bring you closer together.

2. Through stories a child will gain insight into himself and develop a deeper awareness of the world. Children see themselves in the story situation. It matters not whether the characters are people, black or white, or whether the characters are rabbits or badgers; the situation can help children to understand both themselves and the world they live in a little bit better.

3. Listening to stories and rhymes is a way of learning language and building vocabulary.

4. An early exposure to books will not only help prepare a child for school but may encourage a life-long interest that can be beneficial.

But not just any book. The book that may appeal to the 4 year old may not be appropriate for the 2 year old. Children do not reach the same stage of development at the same time, but they generally go through the same stages in the same sequence. Although we will be speaking of "ages" it is more accurate to match the literature to the "stages". Students will need to be assured that if their child is not walking at 9 months and reciting nursery rhymes at 2 years he is no less intelligent than his neighbor who is doing all these marvelous things.

Once we are assured that what we are doing is worthwhile we begin comparing the characteristics of children with the characteristics of appropriate literature. Through lectures, filmstrips, movies, speakers and discussion the students follow the child from birth to school. For each stage of development I have on hand a few examples of stories I enjoy reading to demonstrate to the class the techniques of reading stories to children. There are many other examples that could be used.

I. The first 18 months. We call this the age of curiosity, because babies need to be curious to learn. They learn through their senses; therefore, it is important

for them to have things to see, things to listen to, a variety of foods, and close physical contact with the parents. (Students worry about "spoiling" a baby. It should be pointed out that all living creatures need body contact. Real spoiling comes later.) Curiosity is a good thing and should be encouraged rather than discouraged.

Mother Goose rhymes are fun doing this stage of development. The baby and the toddler enjoy the rhythmic, rhyming verses. They can also enjoy colorful pictures and mobiles that illustrate some of the rhymes. Since one Mother Goose differs from another Mother Goose only in the illustrations, the book should be selected on that basis. Pictures that show all kinds of children are more representative of the multi-ethnic world we live in. One such illustrator is Gyo Fujikawa.

Sometimes students will under-estimate children's ability to "understand" a story or Mother Goose rhyme. They prefer to wait, putting off exposing children to literature with the excuse that "He won't understand it anyway." If that were the case there would be no point to doing this unit! Whether the baby "understands" or not he/she is learning how to communicate. By the time a child understands the phenomenon of a pig going to market it is too late to play the game!

II. From 18 to 30 months. We call this the negativistic age. Sometimes around the age of two the child makes an important discovery---his own mind! We call him/her "negativistic" because so often he expresses his own mind in opposition to his parents'. He doesn't necessarily mean "no" so much as "I can make a decision too." The toddler's development with be smoother if he is allowed to make some simple decisions. At every opportunity he can be allowed to choose between two acceptable alternatives.

At this stage children need to explore their environment. Therefore it is imperative to make that environment safe. They like to play along side, but not necessarily <u>with</u> other children (parallel play) so it is better to have a similar toy for each child rather than to encourage sharing at this age.

In addition to <u>Mother Goose</u> the literature that would be appropriate for this age includes books or stories that involve little or no plot and that require no more than 5 minutes to read or tell. <u>Red Light, Green Light</u> and <u>Goodnight, Moon</u> are examples of favorite books that satisfy the child's curiosity about his world. Rhymes, repetition, giving names and places to things in the context of a simple story.....this is the beginning of literature.

III. From 2 and a half to 3 and a half. We call this the age of cooperation. If the movie "The Terrible Two's and the Trusting Three's" is available it is an excellent illustration. Having been filmed a generation ago it is dated so far as clothes are concerned, but the observations of children's behavior are still relevant. The three year old finally has the hang of it, polite, cooperative, sociable. He takes some pride in knowing how to behave and enjoys figuring things out.

It takes many years to outgrow Mother Goose, and some of the rhymes that were too long and complex for the toddler, like the "Three Little Kittens" and "The House That Jack Built" are fun for the 3 year old. He is ready for a plot. Stories with a moral to them have an appeal at this stage of development. The Little Red Hen, What Do You Say, Dear? and What Do You Do, Dear?, Peter Rabbit and Curious George are just a few of the stories that feature a character whose behavior is exemplary, either as a warning or as a model.

IV. The 4 year old. Just as parents are about to pat themselves on the back for raising such a "good" child, here comes the 4 year old saying, "I can do it myself." We call this the age of autonomy. The 4 year old likes to be independent, takes the initiative and uses his imagination. At the same time he worries about his competency, worries about parental love, worries about staying healthy (What happened to that man's leg? He can ask embarrasing questions about handicapped people). He worries about his "image" and can be known to wear the same outfit every day. The 4 year old can be a nuisance.

Since the child at this stage of development is so much more imaginative the plots can be longer and more complicated. A story can easily take from 10 to 15 minutes to read or tell. Some general themes that are appropriate are:

A. Sibling rivalry. Competition for the love and attention of the parents is the theme of Peter's Chair (Keats) and Baby Sister for Frances (Hoban). Even the only child is not exempt from jealousy, as illustrated in Stevie (written and illustrated by an 18 year old, Robert Steptoe)

B. Competency. Children enjoy stories where the youngest and/or smallest turns out to be the most clever and resourceful. An interest in the fairy tale emerges around this time. Where The Wild Things Are (Sendak) and What Was I Scared Of? (Seuss) are just two of the many examples of stories that address the 4 year old's fears and insecurities with assurances.

C. Information. The child's growing curiosity about the world can be

satisfied with so many books. McCloskey's Make Way For Ducklings or Blueberries For Sal are beautifully illustrated stories that teach so much about how animals actually live. Colors, shapes, sex and other mysteries of nature provide subjects for the many books that appeal to the inquisitive and imaginative 4 year old.

V. The 5 year old. If the environment has been responsive to the needs of the first five years---providing encouragement to a curious mind, providing choices to an expanding mind, providing role models for self-esteem, providing skills for developing independence---the 5 year old should begin a period of latency (until adolescence) prepared to cope with the world.

All the characteristics of pre-school children's literature will still be appropriate. The 5 year old still enjoys detailed pictures on every page, but pictures can be more abstract now. He still enjoys simple plots and occasional rhymes, but the stories can be longer now. Especially important at this stage of development is a character with whom the child can empathize and identify. The character need not be fully developed and multi-dimensional. In fact, he could be stereotypical and as simple as Jack in the Beanstalk or Cinderella, so long as his or her situation exemplifies some of the aspects of childhood. The 5 year old is not unfamiliar with the giants and wicked step-mothers. He faces them every day in his home, his neighborhood and his school. Allegories, legends, stories that lend themselves easily to dramatization like Ask Mr. Bear are fun not only for the children but for the high school students who will be doing this unit.

And therein lies an ulterior motive for offering a unit on children's literature. Students whose reading skills are weak can experience success reading a children's story. Students who have not been able to write a complete sentence can experience a sense of achievement writing an alphabet or number book for a child. There is something in this unit for a wide range of abilities, because the skills taught include:

1. Taking notes using outline form.
2. Using community resources, calling the local library to find out the time of a children's story hour to observe, and checking out picture books from the young people's room to read in class.
3. Interpreting literature orally, making a story interesting to an audience.
4. Writing short essays in response to questions raised by the lecture, discussion and audio-visual materials about child development.
5. Writing a book for a specific audience, the pre-school child.

The time needed to develop this unit will depend upon:

1. The number of students enrolled as each student will read to the class while the other students will evaluate a) his oral interpretation and b) the appropriateness of the story for a particular stage of development.

2. The availability of audio-visual materials and speakers. Some of the effective presentations we have had included a children's librarian, a pediatrician, a psychiatrist and Parents'Magazine's filmstrips and cassettes---"Everyday Problems of Young Children".

3. How much children's literature the teacher wants to cover. I limited my objectives to the books written for children who have not yet reached first grade and therefore presumably cannot read, but a case can be made for continuing a study of the literature through the first six years of school.

References

The following list is by no means definitive. There are innumerable picture books in the public library. There are books and articles, both popular and professional, about child development. There are other movies and film strips that would be just as appropriate as the ones mentioned. The important thing is to have materials on hand with which to begin. I have found the ones listed below to be helpful.

The First 18 Months: From Infant to Toddler
Everyday Problems of Young Children
Parents' Magazine Films, Inc., Dept. F
52 Vanderbilt Avenue
New York, New York 10017 1974

filmstrips and cassettes by:

Erickson, Erik, Childhood and Society, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc. 1963

Ginott, Haim, Between Parent and Child, New York, N.Y., Avon Books, 1969

Spock, Benjamin, Baby and Child Care, New York, N.Y., Pocket Books, 1973

Picture Books

Brown, Margaret Wise, Goodnight, Moon, Harper & Row, New York, 1947
Runaway Bunny, Harper & Row, New York, 1942

Flack, Marjorie, Ask Mr. Bear, McMillan Co.

Geisel, Theodor (Dr. Seuss) The Sneetches, Random House, New York, 1953

Hoban, Russell, Baby Sister For Frances,
Bedtime For Frances,
Bread and Jam For Frances, Harper and Row, New York 1964

Joslin, Sesyle, What Do You Say, Dear? Scholastic Book Services, New York

Keats, Ezra Jack, Peter's Chair, Harper and Row, New York, 1967

McCloskey, Robert, Make Way For Ducklings, Viking press, paperbacks by Penguin Books
Blueberries For Sal

McDonald, Golden, Red Light, Green Light, Doubleday and Co., New York, 1944

Mother Goose, illustrated by Gyo Fujikawa, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1968

Rey, Hans Augusto, Curious George, Houghlin Mifflin Co.

Sendak, Maurice, Where The Wild Things Are, Harper and Row, New York, 1963

Stepto, John, Stevie, Harper and Row, New York, 1969

Tall Book of Make Believe, Harper and Row 1950

Speakers

A children's librarian
Pediatrician
A psychiatrist or psychologist
An author of children's books